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Gandhi's daily Scripture readings for peace

John Dear | Aug. 20, 2013 On the Road to Peace

When writer Louis Fischer visited Gandhi's ashram in 1942, he noticed a picture of Jesus on the wall -- the only wall decoration around -- with the caption, "He is our peace."

"But you are not a Christian," he said to Gandhi.

"I am a Christian and a Hindu and a Muslim and a Jew," Gandhi answered.

"Then you are a better Christian than most Christians," Fischer thought to himself.

Gandhi reportedly spent two hours in meditation each day -- one hour in the morning and one hour in the evening -- for more than 40 years. This became the bedrock for all his daily work for justice, independence and service. Most of his meditation time was in silence, but he always read from the Sermon on the Mount and the Bhagavad Gita, the Hindu Scriptures.

"I have not been able to see any difference between the Sermon on the Mount and the Bhagavad Gita," he once confessed.

After my recent talk on Gandhi at the Wild Goose Festival, several evangelical Christians expressed surprise that Gandhi read daily from the Sermon on the Mount.

"I don't do that," they said to me.

"Who does?" I asked.

Gandhi was probably the greatest modern Christian "fundamentalist" because he took Jesus' word seriously and strictly adhered to his fundamental teachings of love, nonviolence and compassion. Gandhi lived his life according to Matthew 5-7 and returned to that handbook on nonviolence every morning and every evening. In his private letters, he was puzzled why other Christians didn't do the same.

"Isn't it more important to do what Jesus wants us to do than to call him, 'Lord, Lord'?" he wrote one friend, referring to Jesus' lament in the last verses of the Sermon on the Mount.

I have spoken much on Gandhi's devotion to the Sermon on the Mount and how those teachings helped him become an apostle of nonviolence. But I've never reflected on the other text he read every morning and every evening: the Bhagavad Gita, especially chapter two. Gandhi wrote at least six commentaries and translations of the Gita and was constantly interpreting the text, which appears to most of us as a training manual for warfare but which he understood as a handbook of nonviolence.

This week, I thought we could consider two passages from the Gita and pray over them just as Gandhi prayed through our greatest Christian teachings. I've taken these translations from one of my favorite books, *Gandhi the Man* *[1]*by Eknath Easwaran [1]. He called this first passage from chapter two "the secret to the art of living." When the fullness of love is reached, it teaches, then every selfish attachment falls away, including all frustrations, insecurity and despair:

> They live in wisdom who see themselves in all and all in them, whose love for the Lord of Love has consumed every selfish desire and sense-craving tormenting the heart. Not agitated by grief nor hankering after pleasure, they live free from lust and fear and anger. Fettered no more by selfish attachments, they are not elated by good fortune nor depressed by bad. Such are the seers ...
>
> When you keep thinking about sense-objects, attachment comes. Attachment breeds desire, the lust of possession which, when thwarted, burns to anger. Anger clouds the judgment and robs you of the power to learn from past mistakes. Lost is the discriminative faculty, and your life is utter waste.
>
> But when you move amidst the world of sense from both attachment and aversion freed, there comes the peace in which all sorrows end, and you live in the wisdom of the Self. The disunited mind is far from wise: how can it meditate? How be at peace? When you know no peace, how can you know joy? When you let your mind follow the siren call of the senses, they carry away your better judgment as a cyclone drives a boat off the charted course to its doom.
>
> They are forever free who have broken out of the ego-cage of "I" and "mine" to be united with the Lord of Love. This is the supreme state. Attain thou this and pass from death to immortality.

These beautiful verses urge us to renounce ourselves and every attachment in pursuit of union with "the Lord of love," that we might live in wisdom, peace and joy. We might agree with this ancient wisdom, but attaining this "supreme state" is another matter altogether. That's why Gandhi read this passage every day for more than 40 years.

This second passage, in my interpretation, could be addressed to us directly from the God of peace, "the Lord of Love":

> Those I love are incapable of ill will and return love for hatred.
>
> Living beyond the reach of "I" and "mine," and of pain and pleasure,
>
> Full of mercy, contented, self-controlled, of firm resolve,
>
> With all their heart and all their mind given to Me -- with such as these I am in love.
>
> Not agitating the world, nor by it agitated, they stand above the sway of elation, competition and fear, accepting life, good and bad, as it comes.
>
> They are pure, efficient, detached, ready to meet every demand I make on them as a humble instrument of My work.
>
> Who serves both friend and foe with equal love, not buoyed up by praise nor cast down by blame,

> alike in heat and cold, pleasure and pain, free from selfish attachments and self-will, ever full, in harmony everywhere, firm in faith -- such a one is dear to Me.

This beautiful text, as if from the mouth of God, invites us to the life of nonviolence, to "return love for hatred," let go of attachment, be full of mercy, give our hearts and minds to God, and serve God's work and "both friend and foe with equal love."

Pondering these sacred texts helps me understand how Gandhi managed such an even keel of peace throughout his life, even as he faced constant death threat, dire poverty and long prison terms. Perhaps these texts might help us, too, on our journey to wisdom, peace and joy.

"Much of what passes as Christianity is a negation of the Sermon on the Mount," Gandhi said in a famous lecture to the YMCA in Ceylon in 1927. Though that still rings true, he helped Christians around the world reclaim the nonviolence of Jesus, and reminded us of the central importance of the Sermon on the Mount.

As we ponder his beloved Hindu texts, revisit the Sermon on the Mount, and do what we can to resist injustice and war, I hope we too can move deeper into the wisdom of life, discover new depths of peace and joy, and attain that "supreme state" of union with the "Lord of love."

[John Dear's new book, *The Nonviolent Life*, will be published next month. Preorder it here [2]. John will undertake a national speaking tour next year on *The Nonviolent Life*. To see John's speaking schedule or to invite him to speak in your church or school, go to John Dear's website [3] or contact the Francsican-based peace group Pace e Bene [4]. John's book *Lazarus, Come Forth!* [5] and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* [6], *Put Down Your Sword* [7] and *A Persistent Peace* [8], are available from Amazon.com.]

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